

## **Susan Kenney History**



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Interview with Susan Kenney  
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**Melanie Palsky: Tell us a little about your educational experience.**

Susan Kenney: I went to the University of Utah for my undergraduate, and I got my degree in Elementary Education. Then I came to BYU for a Masters in Music Education. At that time, I was told by the (then) head of the school not to go on and get a doctorate, because they did not want a research-type person. Instead, they wanted a practitioner who knew the classroom, and they wanted someone who could help teachers learn about what went on in the classroom.

That was interesting, because at most universities, a doctorate is desired, but at that time I was told not to get one. The person who told me that was James Mason, who was the Music Education Chair, and who went on to be the Dean of the college. I followed his counsel, so my terminal degree is a master's. I tried to make my work here more practical, like they asked me when I was hired.

**Could you tell us about your professional experience at BYU?**

When I was brought here, Jim Mason was the Head of Music Education and Howe Goodman was the head of the Music Department.

I have to say that my time here at BYU, every single one of its years has been fabulous.

There have been some glitches along the way, but by and large, I have been treated so well, and I have been supported. I have been supported in my own uniqueness. There wasn't anyone along the way who was trying to make me fit like a square peg into a round hole.

I have to acknowledge Jim Mason, because he was just fabulous to work for. He was the Music Education Chair, and then he was Department Chair, and then he was Dean, and he was just fabulous to work for. I just feel so blessed about the way things have been here. I really think I lived in a heyday of music education at BYU, and of music education in the public schools. It's starting to go another direction; I hope it doesn't die.

I started to have realizations as I looked at what was going on at BYU. I had lots of people to counsel with—I would also say that Jim Mason guided me a lot. I got involved at the national level of the Music Education Association, and I began to meet people all across the country in this field, so I began to have mentors. I would ask them questions, and they would guide me, and all of that was just eye-opening.

I mean, a person like me would never get hired now, because I didn't have a clearly laid-out vision. I didn't know much; I just was hired to teach these classes. Participating in the Music Education Association got me connected nationally. It gave me some mentors that I could look to for help, and it also was fascinating to me. I loved it. So, when the negotiations with the School of Education came up, again it just seemed natural to me. I could sense that we were overdoing it in some areas. I didn't know that until I worked

with people nationally, and they indicated some things that teachers should probably stop doing. Nationally they were talking about being realistic in the teaching programs. So I had that support. When I started looking at our own program, I had a picture of maybe what it should be versus what it was.

Things just kind of worked out with the School of Education, but I think it's so important when someone first comes to a university that they have a mentor. Now they have built-in mentors, but when I was here they didn't. I had the School of Education head, my department head, and then the dean, and they were very helpful in helping me see the bigger picture.

I feel like everything that got plopped in my lap, I considered to have been a privilege, or maybe more an opportunity. I just kept saying, "Well, no, I can't say no to that," as responsibilities came along, although I wasn't necessarily ready for all of it. Eventually I had a national chairmanship in the Music Education organization and I was called to be the national chair of the Society for General Music. Well, I didn't know what I was doing, so my work there was my teacher. Had I been asked ten years later to do it, I would have done it differently, because I would have had more perspective. But at that time, I was learning along with the job, again with great mentors nationally to help and guide me. So I did not come in with a vision and say, this is where we're taking this, this is where we're going. I just came in wanting to do a good job, and wanting to do what my leaders told me.

I often felt overwhelmed while working here. I remember so many times talking to a colleague here—one of my very favorite mentors, at a personal level, was Gordon Jessop. I remember just going in his office and saying, "I can't do it. I just can't do it. You know, there are only so many hours in a day." I told him, "I don't quit until midnight!" And he just kept saying, "Well, look at the way you organize, and let's get you some help." It was a long many years for me to learn how to structure things so that I could delegate. And it felt like it was expected of me to do everything. I felt that if I was delegating, then I wasn't being responsible. So I had a lot to learn.

I was just always overwhelmed, working my little tail off. Interestingly, the year I started teaching was the year I got married and the year I got pregnant. Boom, everything was happening at once, and I had all of these things going on. Then I raised a family, and I didn't stop teaching, and so it was really, really overwhelming. Now that I understand better how things work, and I know how to delegate, oh my gosh. Life could have been so much better. It wasn't that they didn't give me help, but I didn't know how to use it. It was a very interesting way to work things through. I can do it now.

**You worked in the elementary school system before your collegiate career. How did you make that transition?**

I was an elementary school music teacher. At one point, there was some kind of a conference, and I think it was in Park City. My supervisor in my school district in Salt

Lake asked me if I would take a group of kids up to this conference to demonstrate. I thought, “Okay, great, who should I take? Should I take my children’s choir, or should I take a classroom?” I thought about my fifth grade kids. They were some of the most difficult kids that the school had seen. Right from kindergarten, everybody just knew that this group was hard. The first grade teachers kept saying, “I wish all those kids would move away,” and then the third grade teachers felt the same; you know, it was a hard group. Because of that, I really related to them. I had this sense for kids that struggle. I just want to make their lives work better. I thought, you know, my choir, they get to go places all the time, and these kids never get those opportunities. I think I’ll just take them.

So I took these kids up to this event, and rather than putting on a typical program, we demonstrated what they had been learning in school. They all had little parts, and they said, “Well, we’ve been learning about key signatures,” and, we’ve been learning about this, and we’ve been learning about that. With each little narration, they would demonstrate something. We did so many things; we used recorders, we used auto-harps and other instruments, we used hand signals, and we sang solfeggio.

It was all done out of my own experience. At this point, I did not have a music degree. I had an Elementary Education degree. I had taken a lot of workshops, and I had done a lot of study, and some wonderful things had happened. The most significant of those things was a month-long workshop on a program called “Education Through Music.” That workshop turned my teaching inside out and I started all over again. With my fifth-grade students, we were able to demonstrate some of what I learned from that workshop.

Jim Mason was there at the conference in Park City. He was the head of Music Education here at BYU. They had a vacancy at that time, and they were looking for someone to fill it. Mason came up to me after the conference and said, “How would you like to go to BYU?”

It was timely for me, because I had started getting frustrated in Grant School District. I wanted to do some things in the classroom, like putting bulletin boards down low where little people could see them, instead of having them up so high. Always, the answer from administration had been, “If we have to do it in your room, we have to do it in every classroom in the school.” And I just thought, “This is so wrong.” I had been thinking that maybe I should start my own school. So when Mason asked me about coming to BYU, I thought, “Oh, gosh, I don’t know, maybe.” I had never thought about getting a master’s or a doctorate.

But Mason made it worth my while. BYU paid my tuition; they paid my expenses, they gave me a TA assistanceship; so while I was here, I taught various music methods classes. How could you turn that down? And so I came. I was scared to death.

I thought, “I’m not smart enough to do this.” I didn’t have a lot of confidence in myself. But I made it through the classes and made it through the exams, and when it was all over, Mason said, “Would you consider working for us?” He told me that BYU had been interviewing six people for this job. All of them had doctorates, and none of them had

what BYU wanted. They just didn't have that practical sense of working with children, and on the other hand, I had really demonstrated a broad array of different ways of teaching. Mason said, "I want you. But I knew I couldn't hire you without at least a master's. Now that you've got it, will you work for us?"

That was pretty amazing. My take on that was not, "Oh, I'm going to be an important BYU teacher." Mine was, "You know, if they need me, I'm willing to do it." That's how I've been raised, right? Gosh, if they need somebody, I'll give it a shot. So I was hired, and I just taught those very classes that I had been teaching as a TA.

### **What changes or developments took place within the School of Music while you were here?**

Although it was overwhelming to begin working at BYU, and I couldn't have articulated my vision at the time, as I look back, I recognize that once I was there, I knew I wanted to help make the following changes:

I wanted to change the traditional model, of trying to teach the non-music-trained college student all of the music theory information in two classes, that took years and years for music majors to master. That was the model that was in place at BYU when I came.

I also wanted to give all prospective elementary school teachers the confidence that they were in some way musicians—whether that be performing musicians or listening musicians.

I wanted to help all of these college students gain confidence in their own ability to teach music to children. I had a goal to provide them with strategies and materials, and of helping them experience the music created by great masters such as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, with the same degree of "feeling" that they experienced their own popular music. With those experiences, the students could help children to have music touch their souls. I also wanted to help students understand the elements of music conceptually to see how simple it is to explore music concepts.

In addition, after teaching one semester, I determined it was essential to teach the university classes in the public schools, where we could work with children each week. This intention led to building relationships with public school teachers and administrators who welcomed us into their schools and classrooms. In some cases, principals gave us room so we could continue lectures as well as practice teaching right there in the schools.

Another one of my challenges was to make peace with the School of Education. Because I'm a music educator, the School of Education is something I had to work with. There had been some rough times prior to my coming, and there wasn't a really good relationship. I worked on that, and it turned out to be just fabulous. We worked together

so well. I spent many hours over there on different committees and things, just trying to make our programs connect better, and that was very satisfying.

It took a couple of years to smooth over that relationship. It wasn't a long time. One of the first things we did when I came here was look at our program and see how realistic it was. I was in elementary music. At that time, the elementary music offerings from our department were only for elementary education majors. We did not have an elementary music major. So we serviced all of the Elementary Education majors. Those students all were required to take two hours of method and two hours of skill. So they had to learn the basics of music. So that was four hours altogether, two two-hour classes. I thought that the requirement was unreasonable. We were requiring so much of these students and trying to make them, basically, music majors. Music majors take their whole life to learn what they know.

That was one of the problems; the kids were complaining, and the school of education felt like our requirements were too much. So one of the things that we did, was to cut out a lot of the required materials in order to make it more reasonable for the students to handle what we taught them.

One of the things that happened a few years down the road was the School of Education was totally re-doing its program. The School of Music gave me a summer term to meet every day with the School of Education. We met with them, and we were involved and engaged with their changes.

Originally, there were four hours of music classes that Elementary Education majors had to take. There were four hours of visual arts they had to take. They took .5 hours of dance and no theater. During this summer-long retreat with the School of Education, we worked on changing all these things. The Music Department gave up two hours and Visual Arts gave up two hours, so we could give Dance two hours and Theater two hours. We felt like the kids ought to be getting all of those. So we had gone from music having four hours, and visual arts having four hours, and dance having half of an hour (which was 8.5 hours total), to every department requiring two hours of classes. In the end, we had eight hours total. That made it nice for all of us in this college because we each had to give up something. Music gave up something and art gave up something, but we knew that we were providing a more rounded education. And that was wonderful. As far as we were concerned, that whole experience (collaborating with the School of Education) was a great experience, and we had great people to work with. Bob Patterson was the dean of the School of Education, and he was incredible. Those were really positive experiences.

Then we went down the road a little further. One of our problems in the School of Music with elementary music was that principals in the state of Utah would not hire music specialists. They would hire classroom teachers. We trained classroom teachers and gave them a little bit of music, but we also wanted to train music specialists. I did a little survey at that time, and there were no principals who said they would hire music specialists. That's because the state legislature did not provide funding for hiring music specialists in schools, so principals didn't feel like they *could* hire them. What principals

*did* do in the state of Utah, is ask their faculty, “Who wants to teach music?” And someone with a music background would say, “I do.” But those teachers didn’t necessarily know how to teach music; they just loved music. So we thought, what can we do to change this?

It was at that point that we decided to make a new major. It was called an Elementary Music/Elementary Education major. It was a dual major for our students who wanted to be music specialists in school. It would make them marketable across the country, but more importantly, it made them marketable in Utah. A principal would see that they had a music degree *and* that they had an elementary education certification degree. Then principals would say, “Oh, we’ll hire you, because you are certified to teach anything at the elementary education level *and* you have a special music training. So it made them very marketable, and it was a very interesting idea. The reason that it worked was that the Elementary Education Department and the School of Music could work together and collaborate. We trimmed our program a little, and they trimmed their program a little, so that our students could still get two degrees without it taking ten years. It had become a five-year program, so it was more than the regular degree; but it’s been a pretty successful program.

There’s talk about changing it now, because it’s a little bit cumbersome. These students have to be treated special in our department as well as in their department. That’s because their whole curriculum is just a little different than the standard student.

When we created the Elementary Education major, we had a lot of part-time teachers teaching for us. We decided that we would take all those part-time slots and create a new slot for a second Elementary Education professor. Originally we had maybe four, five, or six part-time people. We let them go, and we had two full-time teachers. The first full-time person we had was Kathy...I know her really well and I can’t think of her last name. She was here for maybe three years or so when our program first started. After that, we hired Brother Jaccard. We were running this program for about four years before he came on, and he has stayed ever since. So the two of us were in this program. I think it’s worked pretty well.

I saw my job, not as trying to turn all of the elementary education students into musicians—but as helping them realize they “were already” musicians at some level. With more confidence, they were ready to survey materials available to teach music, try out music teaching strategies at their individual levels, and hopefully be motivated to continue their own personal music involvement outside of class. I wanted these students to “know music,” not necessarily “know about” music. I hoped they would feel music in their souls. Then of course, I hoped they would be motivated to help children’s souls through music. In many ways, music was a tool to help children feel the spirit, even though we cannot teach religion in public schools. The far-reaching goal was that children would be provided rich music experiences woven throughout each day, for all of their elementary school years.

